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The Politics of Making Sense

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**The Politics of Making Sense**  
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In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs recounts her experiences as an enslaved black woman in 19th century Virginia who immerses herself in a project of self-emancipation. Jacobs devises elaborate plots to elude sexual assault from her legal owner (identified as "Flint" in the narrative) and to ultimately escape bondage, leading herself through a series of anticipations, strategic choices, and calculated actions. In her narrative, Jacobs intends to circumvent the threat of rape within a social context that constructs her as inherently sexually violable. She makes plans to escape slavery within a legal context that defines flight from her circumstances as criminal or pathological. She purposively acts in order to lay claim to her own body within an economic context that systematically entrenches the idea that her body belongs to others. While she constructs intentions that give meaning to her actions, these intentions are not recognized by others through their observation of her actions. The dominant political and cultural context in which she attempts to exercise agency warps the way in which her actions are interpreted and her intentions are surmised by others.

How do we describe the agency of someone who acts in a context of governing definitions, meanings, and intuitions that fail to create a foundation for others to interpret their actions as they intend them? Descriptions of intention typically begin with the premise that it is the agent herself that authors the meaning behind her acts. However, because actions gain collective meaning through their social context, it is others that help confer meaning agential intention. We generally rely on shared meaning in an ongoing process of interpreting our own and others' behaviors. We act in such a way to be understood by others, to make sense, in order to carry on in a social world. Through acknowledging each other's intentions via a mutually constructed background of meaning, we legitimize each others' actions as "reasonable," "understandable," and "clear."

The social dynamic of agency generally works well in most cases in which there is little dispute about the intention of the infinite number of actions we complete as we go about the business of living in a social world. However, how do we explain scenarios in which there are consistent and systematic inconsistencies between what the agent intends her actions to mean and how others interpret the meaning of her actions? Usually, we exercise our intentions through our actions, making acts *communicative* and, therefore, fundamentally social when occurring under the observation of others. One intends, she then acts in a way that conveys this intention, she presumes that her act effectively communicates her intended meaning, and she reasonably anticipates that the

information communicated by her act will be received by observers in such a way that is consistent with her intention. Agent and observers participate in an often unconscious collective process of interpretation and meaning-making that facilitates the process of understanding what other people are doing and why. This is what it means to make sense to others. Certainly people make occasional errors in this process, there are good faith misunderstandings and misinterpretations, but even these scenarios are often relatively easily addressed through clarification from the agent, increased imagination from the observer, or a third party's explanatory intervention.

However, in Jacobs' case, there is a more profound and fundamental rupture in the usual process of social uptake and good faith interpretation of an agent's actions, which undermines collective meaning-making that is a part of the social process of acting. Jacobs lacks institutional entitlement to the natural entryway into shared meaning that makes actions intelligible. The social context in which her actions were received conformed to a set of explanations and meanings constructed for social, political, economic, and legal projects related to her subjugation, rather than any genuine intention that she meant to exercise. Because her intentions contest the social and political structure that relies on both force and a particular logic that justifies force for its own legitimacy, the structure redirects others' interpretations of her actions to a discourse that reinforces the project of slavery. Her oppositional actions, then,

fail to make sense to others. Her intentions are impossibilities, given the dominant logic through which others see her actions.

For this social aspect of agency to work unhindered, agents must be enfranchised into a shared set of meanings that are institutionally embedded to which she conforms her actions and her understanding of her actions. This conformity helps to make one's intentions intelligible to others. In her paper, "Tactical Strategies of the Streetwalker," Maria Lugones describes what it means when an agent is fully "backed up" by institutional affirmation of the meaning behind her acts. She writes,

In (dominant conceptions) of agency, the successful agent reasons practically in a world of meaning and within social, political, and economic institutions that back him up and form the framework of his forming intentions that are not subservient to the plans of others and that he is able to carry into action unimpeded and as intended. He shares in some measure in the control of the context in which he forms his intentions. His alternatives and the direction of his intending reflect his being a shareholder of power.<sup>1</sup>

If one is not sufficiently enfranchised into a dominant context of background meaning, or what Lugones calls "a world of meaning," her actions lack the critical institutional backup, a framework relied on by others to make sense of what she is doing and why she is doing it. Indeed, the disenfranchised agent not only risks being perceived as unintelligible, but when she attempts to clarify her intention, her explanation fails to have the kind of legitimacy needed to

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003.)

realistically challenge or correct any misinterpretations of others (whether they be deliberate or not). Not only does she does she not make sense to others, her marginalization prevents her from participating in the usual corrective processes that occurs when an act isn't socially received as the agent intended.

To illustrate, we can review the experience of Harriet Jacobs' project of resisting sexual violence. As Jacobs worked to resist Flint's sexual advances, Flint consistently asserts his own status as a shareholder of the dominant world of meaning which affirmed slavery. He states that she is "*made for (his) use.*" Sexual exploitation is a defining characteristic of *who she is understood to be* in terms of her sanctioned social relations, creating a powerful social truth that renders her desire to avoid sexual exploitation not simply unable to be satisfied through an effort of choice-making, but *incoherent* given that her desire is illegitimate and unrecognized in any legal, political, or social domain. The fact of sexual exploitation of enslaved women is treated by everyone in the narrative, including enslaved women, as not just a possible tragic event that may happen or is even likely to happen, but as an *inevitability*. Harriet's enslaved peers affirm the ordinariness, as well as the dread, of the rape of enslaved women. Jacobs' writes,

My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him... The light heart which nature had given me became heavy with sad forebodings. The other slaves in my master's house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me; but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof; and they were

aware that to speak of them was an offence that never went unpunished.<sup>2</sup>

Rape is understood as something that is a “routine” practice, in that it regularly happens filling enslaved girls and women with “forebodings” or realistic expectations that it will occur. Jacobs writes multiple times that the other enslaved people “*know*” that rape will happen to Linda and to other enslaved girls. In the universe of possible *known* options, there is no other possible future for enslaved women that does not include sexual exploitation. In this narrative, enslaved people express the inevitability of sexual exploitation; rape is loathed, but it is *customary*, and resistance is ineffectual. Further, Flint makes a point of constantly reminding Jacobs that he intends to rape her. The unrelenting threats create a world of certainty about what will happen and, using this tactic, Flint makes sure that Jacobs understands and believes in the inevitability of rape. She writes, “When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in every thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong.”<sup>3</sup> The assertions that she is “nothing but a slave,” a claim that seems to be fully supported by the sheer authoritative force of the institution of slavery and consistent with the messaging from all available sources, weakens her ability to

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobs, p. 18.

assert an alternative narrative with alternative possibilities. She asserts that there was nowhere to turn for protection, there is no "shadow of law to protect her," it is a "dreaded fate."<sup>4</sup> The apparent future fact of her rape renders her desire to avoid sexual exploitation *incoherent* within the universe of possibility. The seeming inevitability of sexual exploitation that is universally affirmed in the narrative suggests that there is not a sanctioned context in which the desire to avoid exploitation can be intelligible. There is no imagined universe to shape one's will accordingly and no actions that one can take that can be said to be driven by this will. Though this volition is the one that Linda, a rational, thoughtful, and clever person, most identifies with and drives her longing and her values, it would seem absurd.

(SHOW POSTER) This is an advertisement for the capture of Harriet Jacobs. James Norcom is Flint's real name. It was printed in Virginia in 1835. Notice this sentence: "As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation..." One might say, well, he's lying as abusive people tend to do. But why *would* he lie? He is *right* in the context of what is taken as the dominant and pervasive truth within the public sphere where this, of course is published. If we think that the concept of "making sense" as profoundly politicized, we might say that Jacobs doesn't have access to the status of being understood in the context of dominant truth what is taken to be logical. Her action is only intelligible or recognizable as crime. Indeed, Flint is

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<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, p. 27.



quite clear on this point. When Jacobs tells him that she is pregnant with another man's child, which of course suggests she had sex with someone else, he is stunned and overwhelmed with anger. "Linda," he says, "you have been criminal towards me."

This discussion reveals a critical social component of agency, specifically, when we act, we generally assume that the act effectively communicates our intention. However, if there is a breakdown in this social processing of intention and action that is politicized, systematic, pervasive, and sometimes even deliberate, we might need to craft a more layered understanding of how agency works as a communicative and explanatory force between people who are politically and socially located in a context of oppressions. We have seen politically charged interpretations of intentions and actions in more recent examples such as the differently captioned photos from Hurricane Katrina in which white or light-skinned survivors of the flood carrying food are interpreted by the media as "finding" food, while darker-skinned black survivors, also carrying food, are interpreted by the media as "looting." Similar racialized breakdowns in social reception of actions can be observed in some of the ways in which the media characterizes how people in Haiti respond to the catastrophe there. To have a richer understanding of the nature of agency, it is important to consider how the status of "making sense" may be less of an assessment of how rational one's actions are, and more of an evaluation of one's agential enfranchisement to a world of meaning that legitimizes the fact one's subjugation.

